

COMMISSIONERS APPROVAL

CHILCOTT *g*

LUND *BL*

THOMPSON

TAYLOR (Clerk & Recorder)

Date.....July 20, 2006

Members Present.....Commissioner Greg Chilcott,  
Commissioner Betty Lund and Commissioner Alan Thompson

Minutes: Glenda Wiles

Commissioner Lund attended a Fair Commission meeting during the morning hours.

The Board of County Commissioners made a site visit to Gunshy Ridge Three.

A public hearing was held for discussion and possible decision on the Right to Farm and Ranch Bond levy at Hamilton Middle School. Commissioner Lund was absent from this meeting. Commissioners Chilcott and Thompson took public comment. Minutes are as follows:

**Board of County Commissioners Public Hearing  
Thursday, July 20, 2006, at 7:00 p.m.  
in the Hamilton Middle School Auditorium located at 209 S. 5<sup>th</sup> Street in Hamilton**

The Board of County Commissioners conducted a public hearing on the following resolution:

A RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
SUBMITTING TO THE QUALIFIED ELECTORS OF RAVALLI COUNTY,  
MONTANA THE QUESTION OF ISSUING GENERAL OBLIGATION  
BONDS IN THE AMOUNT OF TEN MILLION AND NO/100 DOLLARS  
(\$10,000,000) FOR THE PURPOSE OF PRESERVING OPEN LANDS IN  
RAVALLI COUNTY SUBJECT TO THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS SET  
FORTH HEREIN.

Commissioner Chilcott opened the public hearing and introduced Dan Huls, Chairman of the Right to Farm and Ranch Board.

Dan Huls gave a presentation about the Impacts of Agriculture Study and the proposed Open Lands Bond. He started with an overview of the membership of the Right to Farm

and Ranch Board. The overall goal of the study was to look at the changing role of agriculture in the Bitterroot Valley. This project included the following phases:

1. Refine understanding of the climate agriculture in the valley, including quantitative and qualitative aspects
2. Identify tools and initiatives for enhancing agricultural profitability and conserving agricultural lands
3. Introduce tools to community and area leaders

Dan forwarded the recommendation of the Right to Farm and Ranch Board that the Commissioners adopt a resolution to put a \$10 million open lands bond on the ballot at the general election in November. The Right to Farm and Ranch Board has also proposed the Commissioners establish an Open Lands Advisory Board that will advise the Commissioners in setting policy and making recommendations on proposals and Selection Criteria that will be utilized to determine which proposals are to be funded.

Commissioner Chilcott opened public comment on the proposal.

Ira Holt has lived in the valley for about 20 years. He strongly supports the open lands program. He grew up in Southern California that is highly developed. He is a Fish and Wildlife Association Board member and that Board supports the proposal.

John Vore, MFWP, supports the proposal and hopes that MFWP can be a partner and help leverage money.

Del Buckman from Stevensville. He is confused about this Bond; it is a tax. He stated that this is going to cost money and help only a selected few.

Roger DeHaan, lives south of Victor, and he said the RTFR Board is a valued asset. He explained his understanding is that tonight what we are talking about is whether or not to put the Bond on the ballot, instead of making the RTFR Board collect signatures on a petition.

Dave Schultz, one of the authors of the agricultural study, responded about how many people might benefit from this program. For example, he wanted to know what the value might be to the small clusters of houses located throughout the valley. He said this will help preserve the beauty of this valley and the active agricultural industry. He noted there is an education job we need to do in the next couple of months on this subject.

Sonny LaSalle, lives south of Hamilton. He was on the Planning Board and helped with the creation of the Growth Policy. Quality of life, open space, water quality were all major issues that came up throughout that process. Open space didn't just mean the background (forest land), but also the agricultural lands throughout the valley. Again, this discussion is just about whether or not to putting this on the ballot. A lot of people wanted to vote on the growth policy, and this is about voting on one aspect of implementing it.

Jason Rice owns property here but is not a voter. He supports an open space bond. He challenges other voters to go out and talk to neighbors. He is also a consultant for developers and noted that this is a way for the people to put money towards preservation of open lands, which is a common concern noted during subdivision.

Wayne Hedlund noted this was a fine presentation and he was very impressed. He said it is imperative he has to put his value system and his money in the same place.

Mike Muler works for Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF). He thanked everyone who has been involved with this issue. He said this is an exciting time. RMEF supports the open lands bond and hopes it goes on the ballot. RMEF has helped conserve over 10,000 acres of land in the Valley. He noted there is pressure on farmers to convert farmland into developed land. Throughout the United States this is a trend; passing ballot initiatives to support open lands. We need more resources to help get these types of projects done. In cost of community services studies, American Farmland Trust determined the median cost of services is \$1.15 on the \$1.00 for residential development, as compared to commercial, which is 27 cents and agricultural lands, which is 36 cents. He stated that millions of acres of land will change hands in the next generation. More than 60% of the west will change hands in the next decade.

Kathleen Driscoll stated that culture of Montana is important to consider, including the strength of families and farming.

Chris Hoffman stated he is a tax payer and fourth generation resident. He said the Valley is being loved to death. He urged that this initiative be put on the ballot. As Sheriff, again, he noted that the County is being loved to death. For administrators and public services providers trying to deal with growth here, this is a tool that can help.

Dan Walker, Executive Director of the Teller Wildlife Refuge, commended the Commissioners for getting involved with this effort. He believes this initiative will give the next generation the opportunity to enjoy what we have all enjoyed. Places like the refuge give children the opportunity to understand the value of farmland, wildlife habitat, etc.

Ben Hillicoss stated he supports the idea and shared a personal experience. His family was farmers in upstate New York in an area that is now highly developed. The taxes on that land are now exorbitant and that land is pretty much just open space. He has looked into using a conservation easement on it, but it is too expensive to use that tool. People here may be having the same problem and it is likely pressuring farmers to sell the land to developers. This is a really good idea and it may be the only way to save some of this land.

Tonia Bloom has lived in Corvallis for about 35 years. She supports the bond going on the ballot. She looks forward to the conversations about this proposal and why it is

important to support the initiative. She is supportive of RTFR and agrees with what Mr. Hillicoss said.

Leslie Maki strongly urged the Commissioners to pass the resolution. She noted this is an exciting opportunity for us to help farmers and preserve water quality.

Jim Shay is a native Bitterrooter and he said he had some questions. He questioned that there is going to be open space and it will be taxed, but there won't be public access. He was concerned that most of the tax payers won't be eligible for that Board and that is taxation without representation. He has voted on a number of levies over the years. He also had questions about who owns the land, how many acres will be taken off the tax rolls and how many studies and consultants from back east will make money off this?

Dan commented that the current land owner will still own the land. Regarding public access, it will depend on the landowner. A land owner will likely get more points if he allows public access. About the make up of the Board, he noted this is just a suggested makeup and maybe the Board membership does need to be broadened.

Jim noted that he could not be on the Board and he would like that changed.

Dan Huls also noted the property will still be on the tax rolls. The tax benefit is only on the income tax, not the property taxes.

Rob Johnson, Extension Agent, member of RTFR and citizen stated he applauds the Commissioners, County Attorney and the Planning Department for their involvement. He noted this program is entirely voluntary, because voters have to vote on it and landowners can choose whether or not to use it and how it might work. He noted the hard work of the Bitter Root Land Trust. Partnerships are important for this kind of work. He did not believe it will be expensive and the results of this program will be to help keep farmlands intact. He further noted that the leadership provided by farming families throughout this valley has been significant here.

Phyllis Bookbinder said would like to see this issue on the ballot. She noted that people would like to see public access and questioned if this bond could be used to buy land.

Dan noted the Board really struggled with this issue and preferred not to use this Bond to buy land. He also noted that the bond counsel advised them to include the ability to buy land, but it is anticipated that the criteria will not make it easy to buy land except in exceptional circumstances.

Commissioner Chilcott noted that he would like comments to focus on whether or not this initiative should be put on the ballot or not.

Ben Hillicoss asked what this program would cost.

Dan Huls responded that for a 10 million bond at 5% interest the amount on a house with a taxable value of \$100,000 would average between \$24 and \$32 once the bond is fully funded. Usually only a portion is used at a time.

Laura Craig is the Hamilton Farmers Market Manager. She thanked the Commissioners and noted we need to start talking about where our food comes from. She stated it needs to come from much closer locations than where it currently comes from. Putting this to a vote will allow us to educate people about this.

Ben Hillicoss stated if he did the math correctly that it could cost about \$500 to save about 40 acres.

The Board closed public comment and opened the floor for discussion.

Commissioner Thompson stated this is really about putting this issue on the ballot. He noted that in revolutionary war times there were many people who were not in favor of going to war. In that case the majority ruled and in this case we can vote and see what the majority says. Based on his calculations, he figured it would cost him between \$36 and \$48 per year. For him it is not about the money, but about what it will do for the community by preserving existing agriculture. He said he has received letters and emails and there has been some opposition. In response to the concerns about subsidizing farmers, Commissioner Thompson noted that this will only take care of some of the development rights on a property. It is not the same as a government handout. He said it should go on the ballot and he wants to help put some information out there to help get the proposal to pass.

Commissioner Chilcott noted it will ultimately help the taxpayers because of less needs for infrastructure on some of this land. It will help keep our food source local. He said his family has been in the valley for years and there has been a lot of change here. It is really expensive to farm and this may help farmers keep land in agricultural production, keep our culture intact, preserve wildlife, and protect water. There are many orchard tracts in the valley and as farmers are in need of resources they will sell them off for development and this can help slow that down. This is a chance to put something on the ballot that can help especially as the Commissioners review subdivision after subdivision.

Commissioner Chilcott then noted that they had a small problem tonight because they must have a unanimous decision by the Board of County Commissioners.

County Attorney George Corn confirmed that this is an issue and this meeting must be continued because Commissioner Lund could not be at this meeting this evening.

Commissioner Chilcott stated his big question has always been "how much?" He appreciates the diligence of RTFR, the County Attorney's Office and the Planning Department in tracking down the information.

Commissioner Thompson made a motion and Commissioner Chilcott seconded the motion to continue the public hearing to Tuesday, July 25, 2006, at 3:30 in the Commissioners' Meeting Room in the County Administrative Services Center at 215 South Fourth Street, Hamilton, Montana.